



Williamson Central School District

Elizabeth B. Ashton, Superintendent

4184 Miller Street  
Williamson, New York 14589

Robert Megna, President  
Rockefeller Institute of Government  
411 State Street  
Albany, NY 12203

Dear Mr. Megna and Associates:

On behalf of the Williamson Central School District, I would like to thank you and the Rockefeller Center Institute for the opportunity to speak before the Listening Panel on August 14, 2024 in Guilderland Center. I am the proud Superintendent of the Williamson Central School District, located in Wayne County - 30 miles northeast of the City of Rochester, on the south shore of Lake Ontario. Williamson is touted as “The core of Apple Country in Wayne County,” and is one of the largest producers of apples not only in the state, but also in the nation. Williamson is a proud rural community where the school district is the heart and hub of our community. We have ***Deep Roots, Core Values*** and produce ***Bright Futures***.

The fiscal paradigm of our district likely parallels the narrative of many other rural school districts with average resource need designation. Our current enrollment is approx. 950 students. This represents a declining enrollment of approximately 11% over the last ten years, and 32% over the last two decades. Despite declining enrollment numbers, the district has demonstrated an increasing need for student services and supports spanning Special Education, ELL, mental health, SEL, and prosocial skill development.

Additionally, our student population has seen a tremendous uptick in the percentage of economically disadvantaged students:

- 2023-24: 55% Economically Disadvantaged
- 2013-14: 34% Economically Disadvantaged
- 2008-09: 30% Economically Disadvantaged

It is well noted that students from low-income families often start their educational journey with lower measures of school readiness. Students from low income families also experience the potential for negative impact on their educational attainment without intervention by the district.

It is appreciated that the authors of the Foundation Aid Study are collecting input from the public to inform their study and ultimate recommendations that will be shared with the state legislature at the end of this year. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of the below ideas:

### **Consideration #1: Current Data**

- Given that the foundation formula is under review with potential for revision, please ensure that all data points utilized in the future formula must be current.

### **Consideration #2: Inclusion of Additional Student Weights and Measures**

- Inclusion of additional student weights and measures must be factored into the formula to reflect the composition and needs of our students.
- Student poverty measures must be updated to reflect more accurate representations of our communities, especially in light of community eligibility provision and the resulting number of families who are NOT completing alternate household income surveys.
- Please ensure that the calculation is inclusive of our professional responsibility and moral imperative to provide supports and services for ALL students - economically disadvantaged, special education, English Language Learners, Mental Health, SEL, and prosocial skill programming.

### **Consideration #3: Diseconomy of Scale**

- Declining enrollments are a complex issue and create a “diseconomy of scale” for many small rural school districts. When enrollment declines we stand to lose foundation aid per pupil AND still have a professional responsibility and moral imperative to pay for programming and basic operating costs.
- A great example of this may be found at the secondary level in many rural districts, where we must still employ highly qualified, certified science teachers to teach each of the required Regents level courses whether there are 5 students in the classroom or 20.
- Please ensure that the calculation does not exacerbate the diseconomy of scale for rural districts experiencing declining enrollments.

#### **Consideration #4: District's Ability to Pay**

- Williamson is designated as an average need school district. This would suggest that we have a moderately more than average ability to raise local funds. Higher wealth ratios which result in this designation can be deceiving and offer a misrepresentation of our tax payers' ability to pay and the need/wealth of the students we serve. The formula must factor variables, such as high wealth lake properties and/or large farm properties that benefit from property tax exemptions, etc.
- Please ensure that a district's ability to pay is factored into the calculation.

#### **Consideration # 5: Sound Basic Education**

- ALL students have a right to a free and sound basic education. What is the cost of that sound, basic education? It must be noted that disparity in programming and opportunity already exists across our region, county, and state.
- As we learned in January 2024 with the proposed reductions in foundation aid, the degree to which disparity already exists will be exacerbated with significant reduction to funding. Our efforts towards achieving equity of access for ALL students are all but thwarted.
- We urge that the State establish a baseline to what constitutes a sound basic education in conjunction with reconfiguration of the foundation aid formula. A student's life chances should not be compromised merely by the geography of where they are born.

#### **Consideration 6: Stability**

- We need reliable, predictable funding. **Our work matters. It will continue to matter.**
- Please ensure that the final recommendation addresses reliability and predictability for funding of school districts. We implore that you recommend a long runway for reductions in the event that the final product of this study results in a proposed formula which negatively impacts small rural districts.

Thank you for your consideration of our thoughts and recommendations. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you would like any further information.

Regards,

E. Bridget Ashton

Superintendent, Williamson Central School District